

Senator Lisa Brown

2003 Legislative Report

Dear Neighbors,

My time across the mountains in Olympia was quite a bit different during this year's legislative session because conditions for the Senate Democrats changed from last year. This newsletter will fill you in on some of the major issues we addressed (or, in some cases, did not address).

Before session began, I was honored that my peers selected me to become the first woman leader in the state Senate Democratic Caucus. In my roll as Democratic leader I worked closely this session with my colleagues to craft and promote public policy we think best represents our constituents and the needs of the state. I also worked with the other three caucus leaders and the governor on major issues of the session.

As you know, Democrats lost the majority in the Senate, but we did not lose the will to fight for what we care about most—people. That will was especially important this year, as we faced a \$2.6 billion deficit, and vital state services were on the chopping block.

The choices weren't attractive. We could either drastically cut services or raise revenue to fund essential programs and support education up to the standards set by citizen initiatives. There's more about the budget results inside this newsletter, as well as information on other issues we tackled this year.

While the conditions may change in the Legislature from year to year, the honor I have in serving as your state senator does not. Thank you for the opportunity to work on behalf of the Spokane community. Please remember that my staff and I are happy to assist you in any way we can. My local office is open. Drop by and see us!

Sincerely,



Lisa Brown
State Senator
3rd Legislative District

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Register to be removed from their lists at www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/edcams/donotcall/index.html or call (888)-382-1222.



Budget 101 Seminar

Please join me for a state budget workshop to learn about how the state's \$23 billion budget is put together and to try your hand at the job with a mock budget exercise.

6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Oct. 8, 2003

**Foley Teleconference
Center and Library**

Gonzaga University, Spokane

Space is limited and pre-registration is necessary.

Call Amber Lewis in my Spokane office at (509) 456-2760 to register or for more information.

I want to hear from you!

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Senate Democratic
Caucus Home Page:
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TVW: www.tvw.org

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Cuts in final operating budget are too severe for too many people

The governor signed a \$23 billion two-year state operating budget. Differences in approaches between the House and the Senate and Democrats and Republicans are largely what led to the need for the extra 31 days of special session to finish the Legislature's work.

Washington is still in the middle of an economic downturn. We have one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country and are still feeling the fallout from 9/11 and the dot-com bust.

I recognize the challenges facing budget writers, given the \$2.6 billion

difference between available state revenue and the cost of funding programs and services at their current levels. But the final budget takes an "all cuts" approach that puts too much of the burden on the poor. It also suspends two popular voter-approved initiatives that support investments in education.

If there is a positive to be found here, it is that the final version did not include the severe cuts to children's health care insurance and prenatal care for undocumented women that were in earlier budget proposals.

I couldn't support the operating budget because it:

- leaves about 30,000 low-income working people without health insurance through the Basic Health Plan;
- pushes the dream of a college education further out of reach because of a whopping 14 percent tuition increase during the next two years;
- results in an actual net loss of income for our public employees who not only will receive no cost-of-living adjustment, but will now pay higher health care costs; and
- essentially ignores the contract negotiated by home health care workers that would have given them badly needed pay raises and benefits. While these workers—some of the lowest paid in the nation—did end up with a small raise in the end, the fact that their collective bargaining process was undermined is appalling.

Transportation plan to bring jobs, safer roads

Perhaps the debate to solve the state's traffic problems will never fully subside. Whether to fund more highways and roads or more alternative forms of transportation is a perennial question. This session, the final transportation budget was a combination of both. It will improve safety and congestion on our state's highways, increase freight mobility, preserve ferries and terminals, and create construction jobs that have already begun.

The 10-year, \$4.2 billion new revenue proposal we passed includes a one-time 5-cent increase in the state gas tax, a 15 percent gross-weight fee increase for commercial trucks and a 0.3 percent sales tax on motor vehicles.

Local area projects include adding one lane in each direction of Interstate 90 from Argonne Road in the Spokane Valley and adding barriers to prevent cars from crossing the median on I-90 from Geiger Road to Highway 2 and from Sullivan to the state line.

Revised unemployment insurance system cuts benefits too much

Business representatives have long argued that the current unemployment insurance system is unfair. Modest adjustments to the system came in 2002 that would have saved businesses approximately \$10 million in costs and largely left benefits for workers intact. Those changes were removed after a successful referendum campaign last November.

Near the end of session, Democrats worked to find a solution that would respond to the need for reform and reduction in costs to businesses, some of which pay in to the system far more than their employees take out, and that would protect worker benefits. Early Republican and business-backed proposals would

have eliminated thousands of seasonal workers—such as fruit pickers and construction workers—from eligibility. That was unacceptable to the Senate Democrats.

Washington has some of the highest unemployment benefits in the nation, something we should be proud of. Kicking thousands of seasonal employees—who lose their jobs through no fault of their own—off the rolls is not the kind of state we want Washington to be.

Under the final legislation, business stands to save more than \$200 million, and workers will see substantial benefits cuts. Because of constant pressure in negotiations by Senate and House Democrats and the

governor, we were able to change the business proposal to reinstate benefits for seasonal workers.

But severe reductions in benefits for this class of workers—and others too—are part of the new law.

Some changes to the employment system needed to be made to keep Washington competitive, but you can be competitive and compassionate at the same time. Unfortunately, we weren't.

Legislative successes

Protecting our children: A new tool for law enforcement

I am pleased that this session we gave law enforcement officers a new tool to catch online sex predators who target our children. At the request of the attorney general, I sponsored a bill that expands the crime of communicating with a minor for immoral purposes.

The Internet is a resource that can open up entire worlds to young people. Unfortunately, some of those places, where sex predators lurk and seek to groom young people for sexual abuse, are dangerous. Now, we're making it easier to catch those criminals.

Under provisions in the new law, charges can be filed if the predator believes it's a child he or she is communicating with for the purposes of immoral activity. Under current law, prosecutions can be problematic because sex predators cannot be charged with a crime if the person they are communicating with is a law enforcement officer posing as a minor and is not an actual young person.

A generation ago, pedophiles had to go out and physically find children to lure and abuse. In addition to warning kids about talking to strangers on the street or in the park, we now have to tell them to be equally cautious about who they talk to on the Internet and telephone chat lines.



I was pleased to stand with Attorney General Christine Gregoire, Rep. Pat Lantz and bill supporters as Gov. Locke signed the bill to protect children from online predators.

Other victories

- A big “thank you” to the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Spokane for bringing me the idea for legislation that will help protect passengers who require assisted transportation. The bill calls for the Department of Licensing to provide a driving record for a person who will be a volunteer driver for an organization. This kind of review will help ensure that volunteer drivers who provide transportation for children, seniors or the disabled have nothing in their driving history that might make them poor candidates for the job.
- We passed a prescription drug bill that will enable state agencies to negotiate lower prices with drug companies, develops a discount program for the disabled and people 50 or older who have low incomes, and creates a pharmacy connection program that will help low-income people obtain no-cost or low-cost drugs.

A victory for our health

One of our environmental victories this session relates to an issue many of you have written and talked to me about with great concern: mercury. The new legislation begins phasing out consumer products that contain mercury and increases efforts to safely dispose of these items so mercury doesn't leak into the environment.

Between 2,220 and almost 3,000 pounds of mercury are released into the state's environment each year.

The bill will help control up to 30 percent of that mercury, according to the Department of Ecology.

Though it's a naturally occurring element, mercury is also a potent neurotoxin. Exposure to it can cause blindness, deafness, behavioral problems and death. While children and pregnant women are at particular risk, we are all potential victims of mercury.

You can properly dispose of thermostats and thermometers, two of the most common household items containing mercury, at the Household Hazardous Waste collection sites in Spokane. Call the Spokane Regional Solid Waste System at **(509) 625-6580** or check information on the hours and locations of hazardous waste collection facilities at www.solidwaste.org on the Internet.

Local projects find support in capital budget

The \$2.6 billion capital budget invests millions of dollars in the Spokane region and will stimulate economic growth around the state just when we need it most.

By taking advantage of low interest rates, we can get thousands of people working on projects to improve the quality of life for residents throughout the state and in Spokane. It's one of the few bright spots we have during tough economic times.

We'll be reaping the benefits from the funding for the following projects:

Washington State University, Spokane campus—\$3 million for a new nursing facility at Riverpoint.

Chewelah Peak Environmental Learning Center—\$1.5 million for the completion of this outdoor education and leadership development facility.

Fox Theater—\$1.5 million for further restoration of the historic art deco theater.

Spokane Community College—\$15.7 million to replace the Science Building.

Department of Fish and Wildlife—\$3.9 million for a new regional office.

West Central Community Center—\$500,000 for a child care center.

Spokane Readiness Center—\$13.5 million for this regional National Guard facility.

Spokane Parks and Recreation—\$136,000 for phase two of the 2.9-acre Moore-Turner Garden restoration and construction.

Spokane Symphony—\$56,925 for part of the overall restoration and renovation of the Fox Theater in downtown Spokane.

Friends of the Falls/Great Gorge Park—\$250,000.



A river tour organized by Friends of the Falls showed me how the capital budget funding for the Great Gorge Park would be used to improve this local treasure.

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